



Female soldiers' suicide rate triples when at war

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By [Gregg Zoroya](#), USA TODAY

The suicide rate for female soldiers triples when they go to war, according to the first round of preliminary data from an Army study.

The findings, released to USA TODAY this week, show that the suicide rate rises from five per 100,000 to 15 per 100,000 among female soldiers at war. Scientists are not sure why but say they will look into whether women feel isolated in a male-dominated war zone or suffer greater anxieties about leaving behind children and other loved ones.

Even so, the suicide risk for female soldiers in [Iraq](#) or [Afghanistan](#) is still lower than for men serving next to them, the \$50 million study says.

Findings also show that marriage somehow helps inoculate male and female soldiers from killing themselves while they are overseas. Although these death rates among GI's who are single or divorced double when they go to war, the rate among married soldiers does not increase, according to the study.

Scientists say they hope these and other findings will help them tease out protective social patterns — such as, for example, that sense in a marriage of mattering to someone

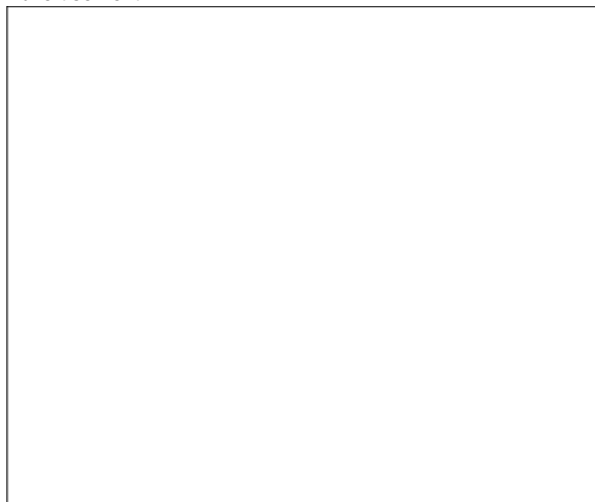
else — that can be encouraged or instilled in all soldiers to lower the risk of suicide.

"One of the big things we're interested in now is digging into this marriage thing and saying, 'What is it you get, by being married? And how could we put it in a bottle so we can give it to everybody, whether or not they're married?'" says [Ronald Kessler](#), a psychiatric epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School who is working on the project.

A goal of the five-year research effort, led by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), is to identify categories of soldiers most at risk for suicide. The Army suicide rate has more than doubled since 2004 from 10 per 100,000 to 22 per 100,000 among active-duty soldiers, surpassing the rate for civilians of the same age and gender.

Last year, when National Guard and reservists data are included, an average of 25 soldiers killed themselves each month. This first slice of data from the study, drawn from Army records on 389 active-duty suicides between 2004 and 2008, is only a small piece of a sweeping research effort

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that will eventually include tracking between 30,000 and 50,000 soldiers from basic training onward, says Philip Wang, NIMH deputy director. He said the project could rival in significance the historic Framingham Heart study initiated in 1948 which uncovered causes of heart disease. Results of the Army suicide study would be valuable in preventing these deaths in the civilian world, says Thomas Insel, NIMH director.

Gen. [Peter Chiarelli](#), the Army vice chief of staff, says he will begin to notify commanders of these initial findings immediately.

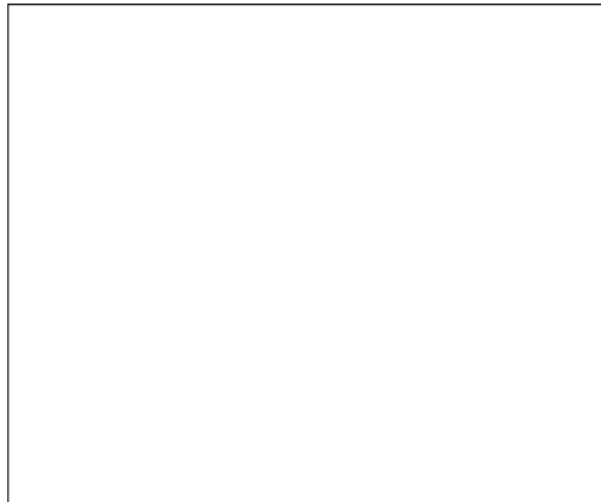
"I want to get this out in the hands of my guys so they can start using it and drawing their own conclusions. We'll give them as much as we can whenever we get it, and not wait until it's peer-reviewed and ... published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*." Chiarelli says. "I'm going to keep beating up on the researchers to give me more and more and more."

Other findings:

- Suicide rates among men increase from 15 per 100,000 to 21 per 100,000 when they deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan.
- Soldiers of Asian descent have dramatically higher suicide rates than other racial groups. Their risk is double or triple that of other soldiers, and four times higher in the war zone.

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